

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y

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CONVICTION - TOLERANCE: The Vital Balance

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FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Matthew 18:23-35, Romans 14:1-10

“Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister. . . ?”
Romans 14:10 (NRSV)

This is a sermon about balancing conviction with tolerance: keeping in healthy, creative tension your most deeply, passionately held beliefs — and your attitude toward those whose convictions are different from and perhaps in conflict with yours. It is not something easily done.

This sermon comes from a text and an experience. The text is a paragraph from a letter written nearly 2,000 years ago. The writer was Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ. The recipients of the letter are a small group of believers in the city of Rome. They have a lot to worry about, what with the official attitude of Rome becoming more hostile to them. But their number one problem seems to be an internal argument which has escalated past the point of differing opinions expressed in civility and respect. This seems to be a classic church fight which has now reached the point of people yelling at one another, calling names, suggesting that the other side of the argument is less than Christian. We will return to the text.

The experience which is the source of this sermon was the Parliament of the World's Religions which was held in Chicago during the last week in August and which I have been pondering ever since. The Parliament was the second of its kind actually. The first one was held a century ago, in Chicago, in conjunction with the World's Columbian Exposition.

A committee of local religious leaders planned the event, elected a Presbyterian, David Ramage, retiring President of McCormick Theological Seminary, to head it up, sent the word out, issued an open invitation . . . and people came. Some 4,000 people came — twice as many as the planners expected. From all over the world they came, some using all their resources, some totally unprepared for a week in a major downtown hotel in a large American city: Hindus from India, Moslems from Africa, Buddhists from Tibet. The opening processional music alternated between Christian baroque eloquently sung by a Chicago ensemble accompanied by brass and four Tibetan Buddhist monks in magnificent saffron robes and high hats, throat singing or chanting, accompanying themselves with a single drum and cymbals.

Zoroastrians and Jews and Baha'is and Confucians and Native Americans and Christians. Cardinal Bernardin was there, along with an official representative of the Vatican. The Dali Lama was there. So were Louis Farrakhan and Hans Kung, one of the most distinguished theologians of our time.

I signed up and attended several plenary sessions, participated in a few workshops conducted by teachers from other religions and, as part of an assembly of two hundred leaders, sat around a discussion table with ten people — the only Christian — to discuss the role religion was playing in our respective cultures, particularly as we deal with the AIDS epidemic.

It was, to say the least, a fascinating experience. The fact that it happened at all, I concluded was something of a miracle. Several thoughts kept occurring. I wondered what God thought about the Parliament. I know God has a sense of humor, and I assume the Parliament brought a few smiles to the divine countenance.

One day, during a break, I was coming down the escalator into the Palmer House lobby and the scene was unforgettable. Colorful costumes, different languages, every race and culture. It was an amazing picture: a Buddhist monk in a saffron robe and sandals, sitting in a corner smoking a cigar and reading the *Chicago Tribune*. My friend from the Diocese Office of Ecumenical Affairs, Fr. Tom Baima, in black suit and Roman collar, in serious conversation with a group of Hindu women — and snaking through the middle of the lobby, a procession of adherents of Wicca, Goddess of Nature, dancing to a tambourine on their way to Grant Park, I assumed. None of the delegates paid much attention. But it was late afternoon and the businessmen checking into the hotel were, to say the least, interested. I assumed God was paying a little attention, was perhaps a little amused and then I wondered if God was pleased. Is this assembly what God wants: people from all over the

world, different races, cultures, different religions, talking, listening, learning and affirming one another. Or does God want what my religion – at least for the last several hundred years - has been trying to do, namely persuade all those people that they are wrong and should sign up with us and become Christians? Are these people targets, a market? Are they to be converted or listened to? What relationship is there between my convictions and theirs. . . My truth and their truth for which we both live and for which we would die if need be?

The second thought that haunted me through that experience – and has ever since – was not mine but Professor Kung's. Kung is a major theological thinker. He has challenged his own church so rigorously on difficult topics such as Papal authority, birth control, ordination of women to have resulted in the Vatican withdrawing his credentials as a church theologian. Nevertheless he remains a devoted Roman Catholic, a professor and author. He accepted our invitation to preach here and so I heard him speak both publicly and privately. And, every chance he got Professor Kung said:

"There will be no peace in the world until there is peace among the religions."

The first time I heard it I thought it was theological hyperbole, an exaggeration. We pushed him on it. Surely many, if not most of the wars are caused by economic, political, perhaps nationalistic conflicts. "Perhaps" he said, "perhaps some." But not many conflicts which result in human beings killing human beings go on without religious content, inspiration, overtones, background, vocabulary, and ultimately support. It's true, of course, in the tragedy of former Yugoslavia where Christians and Moslems have been hating one another for centuries. It's true in India, between Sikhs, Hindus, Moslems, and the Sudan where religious, Moslems/Christians, divide the nation into a vicious civil war. It's true in Northern Ireland, where Roman Catholics and Protestants have been at it for centuries, and Israel/Palestine.

"No peace in the world until there is peace among the religions," he argued.

And for some reason I recalled the first time I ever saw the most vulgar four-letter Anglo-Saxon word in the language in public print, long before we became accustomed to seeing it in subways and bestsellers. It was, of all places, scrawled in six-foot-high letters on a wall in the Protestant section of Belfast. It was in its verb form and the object was the Pope who was coming to the Republic of Ireland for a visit. We were there with a group of young people to see how religion was contributing to peace and reconciliation. Unfortunately, we were witnessing the opposite: how religion had become, if not the reason for violence, at least its accompaniment, its background music. It is not a religious conflict in Northern Ireland. The official churches have condemned it. But both sides effectively use an unholy combination of racial and religious prejudice.

I think it was Lord Acton who said:

"There is nothing so fearsome as one lone Calvinist in possession of the truth."

And Oliver Cromwell, in the middle of arguing with contentious, stubborn, belligerent Scots Presbyterians, asked the unthinkable:

"I beseech you by the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken?"

Religious conviction, deeply held, often conflicts with a basic human value: tolerance, respect, acceptance of persons whose convictions, equally deeply felt are different from, or in conflict with my own.

It is a dynamic within the Christian Church and among its many divisions; between Protestants and Catholics, among Protestant bodies and between conservative and liberal wings of each of the communions: Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists. And it is a major dynamic as Christians relate to people of other faiths in our shrinking, pluralistic world.

Professor Kung wrote a book: *Theology for the Third Millennium* in which he tackles the issues:

"Christians," he writes, "have too little awareness of how often, despite its ethic of love and peace, Christianity in its actual appearance and activity, strikes the adherents of the religious as exclusive, intolerant and aggressive." [p. 238]

The Missionary Movement of the 19th and 20th centuries envisioned what some have called –

“a Niagara of souls plunging down relentlessly to a lost eternity . . . millions who had never heard of Christ were beyond saving. Certainly, their own religions could not avail - at best they were pitiful human groupings in the darkness of sin and ignorance.” But there is a new openness on the part even of Evangelical theologians: a new acknowledgment that “there is goodness, truth and beauty in other religions . . . that God is at work among all people and all cultures and all religions.” [*The Christian Century*, 9/8-15/93]

My proposal is that a religion that assumes that we have all the truth and others have none, whether “we” means we Presbyterians, we Catholics, we evangelists, we liberals, or we Christians, actually diminishes our own theology and misrepresents the only absolute, the one God the whole enterprise is about.

The issue has been around a long time. To ancient Israel came the word of radical monotheism: “the Lord is God: there is no other.” And as soon as the word is out of Moses’ mouth the argument begins. Some want to proceed narrowly, conservatively:

“God’s oneness is our private secret. Our God is real. Yours is a fake.” Others want to take the broad road: “The one God is Lord of the Persians and Babylonians too, only they use a different vocabulary.”

At their better moments, in prophetic voices like Isaiah, Micah, Moses, God’s people know that they are chosen, not to be God’s only children, but to show the world what it looks like to live as God’s children. They are not instructed to go out and convince everybody to speak Hebrew. Their job is to live faithfully in the world and turn over to God the responsibility for the final outcome.

Jesus was notorious, to the narrowly religious for his acceptance of, his respect for all sorts of people – Jews, Gentiles, Samaritans, Africans – zealous religionists and people with no religion to speak of. But as his followers have gone into the world they have sometimes forgotten his own posture of grace and acceptance . . . “Go into the world and baptize in my name” has been interpreted to mean not merely proclaim, but also argue, convince, win, cajole, and, on occasion, force – if need be, the process of conversion, which meant persuading people of the wrongness of their faith claims and the truth of our own.

There is apparently a propensity about us and in all of us, to portray our news as the only news, our truth as the truth with a capital T, the absolute and only truth.

If Hans Kung is only partially right, what the world needs are not more soldiers of Christ, but a new Christian theology which is committed to its truth – particularly the truth that is bigger than any theology and a consequent respect for others and an openness to their truth.

Listen to Professor Kung argue it out:

“I am a Christian because I believe in this Christ . . . and try to emulate him for the guide for my path. He is for us, the way, the truth, the life But Christians do not believe in Christianity. It’s untenable to define Christianity as the absolute religion. No religion has the whole truth, only God has the whole truth. Lessing was right . . . only God is the truth.” [op. cit. p. 251, 255]

And now the text – from strenuous theology to the practical down-to-earth matter of living with people whose convictions are different – something each of us must do.

Sometimes it seems that things don’t change much. There were, apparently, two contending factions in the early Christian Church in Rome. You’d think they had enough to worry about what with the entire Roman Empire trying to stamp them out. But no, Christians always have enough energy left to argue with one another. So that is what was happening. And it wasn’t merely an argument. It had escalated into a matter of truth and error, good and bad.

On the one hand there were the conservatives who said that in order to be a Christian you had to obey the Levitical dietary law which carefully prescribed what kind of meat was allowed and even how it was to have been prepared. Some of these people didn't eat meat at all rather than risk breaking the law. They also carefully and rigidly observed the Sabbath.

And within that Christian Church, there was a liberal party, which believed that the freedom Jesus Christ established and Paul himself proclaimed, included freedom from the old religious strictures. They didn't bother with the dietary code or, for that matter, the Sabbath restriction.

To the liberals it seemed that the conservatives were not quite Christian, that they had missed the good and gracious news of God's love in Christ and were holding far too tightly to customs and traditions, the sole purpose of which, it seemed to the liberals, was to maintain a wall of exclusivity.

To the conservatives the liberals seemed, well, "liberal" as only a conservative can say that word: soft, morally easy, undisciplined, lazy, obviously sub-Christian.

Paul acknowledged the split, didn't condemn either side for their respective position, condemned only the way each party was condemning the other.

"Why are you judging each other?" he asked. "We all are judged by God."

For Paul, the appropriate and faithful and Christian attitude was one of respect for the faith conviction of others, acceptance of the others, forgiveness of others, and even openness to the position of the other people as a vehicle, perhaps of some truth.

How is it possible, Paul asked, to judge another person on the basis of truth? Are we not all judged by the same God? How is it possible to coerce the conscience of another? It is not possible in Christ to do that. He did not do that.

He is our truth, the one on a cross, arms outstretched to embrace a whole world, a Christ so consumed by God's holy love for the whole world that he offered his life for its healing. A Christ who told stories of a wonderfully inclusive grace, a banquet to which all are invited, a love that transcends race, ethnicity, gender, a Kingdom where sins are forgiven in mutual regard and respect.

Is our Christianity Christian, Professor Kung asks. And by that he does not mean is it doctrinally correct: are we saying the right words, reciting the right creeds or belonging to the right organizations? Rather does our religion reflect the spirit of Christ? Does it proclaim grace, mercy and love by its mission?

In its life does it actually practice the forgiveness about which he spoke and which he died extending to his executioners? In its life, does it actually practice the renewal and healing he did when he took that woman caught in adultery by the hand and helped her stand up. . . as stones dropped from the hands of the religiously correct and morally pure?

Is our Christianity Christian? Does the world see the unconditional love of God, the amazing grace of Jesus Christ, when it looks at the Christian Church?

What then is the missionary task of Christians? Some will conclude that to begin with respect, tolerance and openness to the truth of others is too soft: that our mission is to market Jesus, make converts, score, win, convince everybody to become Presbyterian or Southern Baptist or Roman Catholic.

My proposal is that our task, as a church and as individual Christians, is to live in the world in the spirit of Jesus; to tell the story of Jesus; to tell about God's passion for the world; God's persistent love for all the people of the world. I do not believe our task is to shout louder than everybody else. It is to make certain we have expressed our convictions about God's love by speaking clearly and by acting lovingly in justice and mercy and forgiveness.

I believe God calls us to let go of religious exclusiveness and the comfort and security it provides, and to bravely trust that the final outcome of the story, our dear one's stories, our own stories and the story of every human being – even human history – are in the hands of God.

I believe Hans Kung was right: no peace until we get this straightened out; until we learn to think in new ways about our truth and the truth of others. It's not easy if you have been taught that you are right, and people who do not share your convictions are wrong, that you are saved and they are damned. It is not easy to let go of that, to love and thank God for the truth that is yours, and respect that same dynamic for others. But I believe it is what God wants of the church – and of us.

Where does this lead? What is the end of this new yet very old way of thinking/believing/trusting? Professor Kung concludes his book on ecumenical theology with these words – which he also used to conclude his sermon here:

“As far as the future goes, only one thing is certain. At the end of both the human race and the world, Buddhism and Hinduism will no longer be there - nor Islam, Judaism, Christianity. . . no religions. . .but the one inexpressible, to whom all religions are oriented, whom Christians will only then completely recognize, when the imperfect gives way to the perfect, even as they themselves are recognized: the Truth – face to face.” [p. 255]

And in the meantime respect, conviction and tolerance: vital balance in the spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.